

2.0 Frequently Asked Questions and Answers About Avian Flu

What is avian influenza (bird flu)?

Avian influenza is a type of influenza that usually infects birds. There are a number of different avian influenza strains, and they vary in severity. The strain that is currently causing a lot of concern is called H5N1. It was first found in Asia in 1997. Since 2003, more than 200 people in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa are known to have been infected with this form of bird flu. About half of these people have died. Most people infected with avian influenza have had direct contact with infected chickens or other poultry. So far, there is no evidence that bird flu can spread readily from one person to another. It is possible, however, that the virus could change (mutate) into a form that could spread easily from person-to-person. If that happens, a global outbreak could occur, causing much illness and many deaths. This is why governments around the world are keeping a close eye on the bird flu virus.

What is an influenza (flu) pandemic?

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. Fortunately, flu pandemics are rare. They happen only when a new strain of flu appears in the human population, and spreads readily from person-to-person worldwide. Flu pandemics can be much more serious than seasonal outbreaks of flu. Compared to seasonal outbreaks, which happen every winter, pandemics can cause more severe illness because most people have never been exposed to the new strains of flu and therefore have no immunity.

A pandemic of avian flu would only occur if these bird flu viruses change so that they can be passed readily from human-to-human. This has not yet been shown to occur during the current bird flu situation. The current highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 strain does not spread readily from person-to-person. Experts are monitoring this strain for changes in the virus that might indicate that it could start a pandemic, but at this time it is still a disease primarily of birds, not humans.

The 1918 “Spanish flu” was the 20th century’s largest pandemic and killed at least 500,000 people in the United States and up to 40 million worldwide. There were also much smaller pandemics in 1957 and 1968, in which the death rates were double or triple the number that occur in a usual year. (The “usual” influenza is, in fact, a deadly disease that should be taken seriously, causing an estimated 36,000 deaths in the US each year.)

What is the Palm Beach County Health Department doing to prepare for a possible flu pandemic?

The Department is working with many organizations and partners, including the medical community, local hospitals, and state and federal health officials, to prepare for a possible flu pandemic in Palm Beach County. Planning includes making sure hospitals are ready to treat patients, educating doctors, and providing information to all Palm Beach County citizens. The County has a number of systems in place to identify where and when flu viruses occur, and to help us communicate quickly with doctors and the public about how to avoid infection.

How does bird flu spread?

The avian flu virus H5N1 is present in the saliva, nasal secretions, and droppings of infected birds. Birds spread the virus to other birds through either direct contact, or contact with surfaces contaminated with these secretions and/or feces. Health officials believe that nearly all people with H5N1 since 2003 became infected through direct contact with infected poultry.

What are the symptoms of avian flu?

Symptoms are different in different people. Some people have had typical flu-like symptoms, such as fever, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches. Others have had eye infections, pneumonia, severe respiratory disease, gastrointestinal illness and other serious and life-threatening complications.

How do I protect myself?

In a pandemic, the community systems we rely on—health care, schools, work, travel, religious institution and social events—may be severely disrupted. Disease control will require individual and community action:

- Personal hygiene measures—washing hands frequently, covering coughs, staying home when ill, and staying informed of the situation.
- Community measures—voluntary isolation of ill people, limiting illness to specific wards or hospitals, curtailing travel, and canceling large events (basketball games, concerts, etc.) may be used.
- Also, anyone with cough and a fever over 101 degrees Fahrenheit should stay at home until the fever subsides. People who are more severely ill should see a doctor, especially if they have shortness of breath and chest pain. Everyone should take these precautions during the “regular” flu season as well.

What is the Risk of a pandemic?

Many scientists believe it is only a matter of time until the next influenza pandemic occurs. The severity of the next pandemic cannot be predicted, but modeling studies suggest that the impact of a pandemic on the United States could be substantial. The CDC projects that as much as 25% to 35% of the US population could be affected.

Is there a bird flu vaccine?

Not yet. The federal government has been working since April 2005 to develop a vaccine, and clinical trials are now underway. For more information about vaccine development, visit the National Institutes of Health website: <http://www3.niaid.nih.gov/>.

Once a vaccine becomes available, how would I be able to get one?

If a pandemic were to occur, supplies of vaccine would be prioritized in stages over the weeks and months of the pandemic. People who would be first responders to the pandemic, and those at highest risk for serious illness and death from avian flu would be offered vaccine first. After that, the County is preparing to open large-scale vaccination clinics called Points of Distribution (POD) Sites. Finally, when enough vaccine is available, people would most likely be able to get it from their doctors.

How is bird flu infection treated in people?

Treatment is mainly supportive care (e.g., get plenty of fluids and rest). Doctors might also give antibiotics to prevent or treat bacterial infections that sometimes accompany the flu. Some antiviral medications commonly used to treat “regular” flu symptoms may be used to treat avian flu in persons most at risk for severe illness or death, including older adults and people with lung or heart disease. One of these medications, Tamiflu®, may help reduce the seriousness of avian influenza H5N1. However, there may not be enough of these medications available to treat everyone in the early stages of a pandemic.

Should I ask my doctor for Tamiflu® now so that I can take it if there is ever a pandemic in Palm Beach County?

No. Doctors should not prescribe Tamiflu® to people who do not need it. We strongly discourage people from getting or stockpiling the drug if they are not ill. Taking Tamiflu® improperly could lead to drug resistance. Supplies of the drug are needed to treat people who are sick with the “regular” human type of flu that appears every year. Also, it is not clear whether Tamiflu® would be effective against the particular strain that was circulating if a pandemic occurred.

What is currently going on with H5N1 bird flu worldwide?

Human infections of avian flu have been reported in Azerbaijan, Cambodia, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Thailand, Turkey, and Vietnam. Outbreaks of bird flu were first noted among birds in Asia in late 2003 and early 2004. In 2005, outbreaks of the deadly bird virus were reported in Eastern European countries and again in South Asia. 2006 has seen the virus spread among birds to countries in Africa, Western Europe, and the Middle East. More than 100 million birds in these countries either died from the disease or were killed to control its spread.

What is the risk to people from the H5N1 virus in Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa?

So far, spread of H5N1 virus from person to person has been extremely rare. However, because all flu viruses have the ability to change, the H5N1 virus could one day become highly infectious and spread easily from one person to another. Experts from around the world are watching the situation very carefully and preparing for the possibility that the virus may begin to spread more readily and widely.

What is the risk to people in the United States from the H5N1 bird flu outbreak overseas?

The strain of H5N1 virus found overseas has not been found in the United States, or anywhere else in North or South America. It is possible that travelers returning from affected countries in Asia could be infected if they were exposed to the virus as a result of direct contact with infected poultry (at a live poultry market, for example) or with a person infected with avian flu. Since February 2004, medical and public health professionals have been on alert to find any such cases, but there have been no bird or human cases of H5N1 flu in the United States.

If I see a dead bird in Palm Beach County, should I report it?

Dead birds can be reported to PBCHD Division of Environmental Health at 561-355-3070. While individual dead birds may be collected and tested for West Nile Virus, a smaller proportion of those birds may also be tested for avian influenza. Year round, the PBCHD will work with other city, state and federal agencies and partners to investigate clusters of dead birds that are reported in Palm Beach County.

H5N1, the strain of bird flu causing bird illness overseas, has not been found in birds or humans in Palm Beach County or anywhere in the western hemisphere at this time. Federal and state agriculture agencies are monitoring poultry and migratory birds for avian influenza. PBCHD is working closely with these agencies so that H5N1 avian flu could be detected quickly if it appeared in Palm Beach County. For more information about surveillance for H5N1 in migratory birds visit the website for the United States Department of Agriculture at: <http://www.usda.gov/>.

Could I get bird flu from a bird in Palm Beach County?

H5N1, the strain of bird flu causing serious problems overseas, has not been found in birds in Palm Beach County. Contact with birds currently found in Palm Beach County does not pose a risk for infection with H5N1.

Should I avoid eating eggs or poultry?

No. There is not currently any evidence to suggest that eating eggs or poultry in the U.S. could cause infection with avian flu. For general food safety, however, whole poultry should always be cooked to 180°F, and chicken breasts to 170°F. Eggs should be cooked until the yolks and whites are firm. Always wash hands, cutting boards, dishes, and utensils with hot, soapy water after they come in contact with raw meat, poultry, and seafood.

How can I help in controlling the spread of disease?

Although a vaccine is not likely to be available to protect against a new pandemic strain of influenza, getting a flu shot is still the best way to prevent normal seasonal influenza that kills thousands of people in the U.S. each year.

Wash your hands frequently. Use waterless alcohol-based hand gels when soap and water are not available and when hands are not visibly soiled.

If you are not feeling well, wash your hands frequently and cover your mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Avoid touching or kissing friends and family members, avoid public gatherings, and stay a safe distance (more than three feet) away from other people to avoid spreading your illness.

When planning an international trip, check the CDC Traveler's Health Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/travel> or call their public information hotline at 1-888-246-2675 for the latest travel advice.

The CDC currently advises travelers to countries with known outbreaks of avian influenza to avoid poultry farms and bird markets where live poultry are raised or kept. Avoid any surfaces that appear to be contaminated with poultry feces or secretions.

Influenza virus is destroyed by heat. Thoroughly cook all foods, including poultry, eggs and poultry blood.

After return from travel, monitor your health for 10 days. If you become ill with fever and develop a cough or difficulty breathing during this 10-day period, be sure to tell your healthcare provider about your travel.

Where can I find more information on avian influenza and pandemics? The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS): <http://www.pandemic.flu.gov>.